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ABSTRACT

Collaboration in writing is not confined to conventional multiple authorship and peer editing, but extends across the text to include its readers. Strong support for language development comes from dialogic situations in which student writing is created as a response to some other utterance, and yet classrooms rarely support such situations. The site of composing must support dialogic motives for invention. In a course designed to accomplish this objective, students' writing styles demonstrably changed to become more functional in a setting stressing dialogue and communication among peers. A method for teaching writing can be based on dialogic techniques by allowing students to generate topics of study, by communicating via computer network, and by concentrating on responding to what other participants are saying and thinking. A number of excerpts from student comments regarding one student's topic of study reveal the extent to which a dialogic approach can help students to focus and determine their final papers. In addition, the thoughtful and sometimes lengthy comments on a final report, again all written by other students, show an appreciative support for the accomplishment as well as suggestions for further questions related to the topic. Finally, several excerpts from student evaluations of the course illustrate the ways in which they believe their writing changed during the process of the course, changes due mainly to the fact of the writing being embedded in dialogic chains of conversation in which motives for invention are emphatically social. (HB)

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Utterance in the Classroom:

Dialogic Motives for Invention

We know from the work of Karen Burke LeFevre, Jim Reither and Doug Vipond, and Anthony Paré, among others, that "collaboration" in writing isn't something that's confined to conventional multiple authorship and peer editing, but extends across the text to include its readers. We know from Bakhtin that an utterance always occurs in response to previous utterances, whose authors often become the audience for the new one. We suspect, from a great deal of work in language development and second language learning, that strong support for this development and this learning comes from such dialogic situations. And yet our classrooms rarely support these situations, in which written documents become utterances, created in response to other utterances and in anticipation of dialogic response. Almost always, written texts in classrooms are produced in compliance with explicit demands and in anticipation of evaluation.

Can classrooms becomes sites in which texts exist in such dialogic relations, and do writers learn about writing in such sites?

Obviously, I believe they can or I wouldn't have raised the question. I want to suggest here some ways in which such dialogue can be fostered in educational contexts -- involving enterprise-centered collaboration and electronic networks -- and offer some evidence that learning about language does occur in situations where the site of composing supports dialogic motives for invention.

Here's an example of student writing:

> Ultimately, the relationship between comedy and its audience cannot be measured because society is not homogenous in nature; there can be no absolute because there is no universal standard.

That sentence was chosen last week by one of the students in my current Eighteenth Century Literature class as a typical example of how she wrote at the beginning of the course, last semester. I had invited them to help me put together a presentation for this Round Table by looking back over all the work they had done and reflecting on whether they could see any differences in the writing they were producing in September and the writing they are producing in the last month or so. About that sentence, she said:

> I found my initial report to be very formal. I think we were trying to impress you, the professor, rather than our classmates because that is what we are used to doing. I think when we write essays we tend to try to aspire to academic heights and we try to sound as academic as possible. When we write for the benefit of our classmates, we know that they are at the same academic level, so we

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> don't have to sound so professional. The writing in class is more friendly; more personal and less formal.
>
> I think, too, I am more relaxed in my writing because there isn't the pressure of a paper that is worth 40% of the mark. With this type of class, I am able to relax and this changes my writing style, I believe.

Here's the sentence she chose from her more recent writing.

> From what I've read about the often diseased food at the time, I don't think I would have wanted to have eaten back then.

I do not want to contend that that second sentence represents "better" writing than the first. I am not arguing that it has a more authentic voice, that it's more concrete and personal and therefore more effective, or that the student has found a superior register in which she should now attempt to produce her papers for her other literature courses. I believe the first kind of writing is as necessary and as useful as the second, and, further, that the only criteria that could possibly be used to judge which is "better" writing are functions of the site in which the composing occurs. What I would argue, and what I think the student is arguing, is that the second kind of writing is "better" in a situation where what she is doing is writing to engage and inform the other students in the class. Now, the first piece was written, as well, in just such a situation -- but it is clear, I think, that she hadn't yet begun to make the sorts of adjustment that are apparent when you contrast the two.

Let me try to describe very briefly what sort of site for composing I attempt to create for my students. I do something like this in all my courses; it so happens that this one is an undergraduate seminar in Restoration and Eighteenth Century Literature, enrolling thirteen students, which makes it rather atypical, but I work toward essentially similar writing and learning situations in whatever I teach.

I'll begin with the negatives. The course has no common text, no lectures, and no formal essays or examination. I do not grade or comment on the students' writing. There are no formal seminars (oral presentations by students).

What *does* happen, then? The course begins with my handing everyone a long, written introduction to the course, and giving everyone time to read it silently. I also had out -- as I do at the beginning of most sessions, a document headed "In Class Today." Last September 10, that document said, in part:

> As you'll discover, one of my central beliefs as a teacher is that reading and writing are powerful tools, and ones we don't use as often as we might. One of the ways in which that belief is acted out in my teaching is that I write a lot, ask you to read it, and expect you to write a lot and expect others (including me, sometimes) to read it. But I don't expect that the writing is going to be used in the way most educational writing is used -- that is, as a basis for evaluating the writer (can she write? does she know what she's supposed to know?). I expect it's going to be used the way you'll use most of these handouts -- to see what I have to say, and respond to it in some meaningful way

(by doing what it asks, or arguing that what it asks doesn't make sense, for example).

That handout also asked everyone to write about the eighteenth century for ten or fifteen minutes. What the document said was this:

> . . . the second part of the class will involve everyone writing about the literature of the eighteenth century, reading each others' writing, and generating responses and questions. This is a way of ascertaining the sorts of thing we all know, and need to know, about the period, about its literature, and about literary study, and generating some issues and concerns that we're going to be addressing over the first few weeks.

During that class session, we generated a set of questions about the eighteenth century. At the end of class, we had divided them into questions which no one expected could be answered, questions which could only be answered after a good deal of study and learning, and questions which might be answered by a group of two or three students who spent some time in the library over the next week. I divided the class into groups, the groups picked a question (they included questions on comedy in the period, on changes between this period and the seventeenth century, on what an ode was and on who were important playwrights at the time), and we were off. Next week, each group had completed a draft of a report and keyed it into the computer network through which we share most of our work. Printed copies were distributed and in class we wrote about those, exchanged and read them, and generated further questions for each of the groups, who went back to the library to elaborate or revise their reports.

In the meantime, we began a running conversation on the electronic bulletin board set up in the lab. Everyone was required to log on and read the board -- and contribute something -- each week. The contributions have varied from Merry Christmas messages and complaints about the heat in the computer lab to an extended, multi-voiced discussion of whether Moll Flanders should be regarded as primarily the author of her own fate or a victim of society. Everyone was also required to touch base with me once a week through the (more private) eletronic mail system. Letters there have varied from "nothing to report this week" to long exchanges about the reasons why some people find it harder to participate in oral discussions than in written ones (that one in fact expanded into a bulletin board discussion).

Since fall, according to a rough count, the thirteen students in this course have generated over 30,000 words on the bulletin board and over 26,000 words in electronic notes to me. How much they may have generated in notes to each other I have no way of knowing, but it is considerable. Even without that the total works out to a bit over 4000 words per student.

Beyond that, of course, there is a great deal of in-class inkshedding, question generating, commenting on other people's reports, questioning them, and so forth, which I have no way of counting.

And perhaps most important there is all the electronic writing done in the more formal context of written reports to the rest of the class, and comments on those reports by their readers. Although the mechanics of this have varied as the course (and our familiarity with the computer network)

developed, the most recent cycle of reports, all of which had to do with some facet of the class's reading of Pope and Johnson, were handled this way. Questions and issues were discussed (in part through in- and out- of-class inksheddings) and then proposed individually, in files in a common directory on the network. Each person in the class was invited to read the questions posed by all the others and add comments and suggestions to the individual files. As the comments accumulated, the authors read them; in some cases these led to modifications of the questions, and in some the authors were offered strategies for finding answers; in most there was a good deal of comment suggesting that others were interested in the questions. Over the next week or so, as the authors began finding answers to their questions, they began putting drafts into the same file, immediately following the sets of questions and comments. As the drafts lengthened, others read them and added comments on, and questions and suggestions about, the drafts in the same files, following the drafts. As authors checked back on the responses to their work, they regularly edited and changed the drafts in response to their audience's questions. Comments on the bulletin board suggested that this was, from most of the students' point of view, the most successful way of managing of this collaborative form of writing we had yet tried.

It is difficult in a few minutes to give any flavor of the discussion in these files, and I didn't move fast enough to save the original drafts, so as I read through the files it isn't clear how the comments on first drafts affected subsequent modifications, but let me pull some examples out of one such file, one which began with this question, from Darlene:

> My question has to do with Pope's repulsiveness both physically and personality wise as I feel his ability to write satiric literature may be connected (simply because I'm sure since he is described as looking like a toad that he knew that people found him repulsive and therefore promoted this repulsiveness in his personality, which ultimately led to an ingenious ability to compose satiric literature as a way to overcome the public's view of him). I may be way off, but I feel that this may be the case as Russ explained in class that Pope used to get very irate if someone had said his parents had been poor and also that not many people who knew Pope liked him. If I'm unable to get any information upon this connection between his physical and personality repulsive character which may have influenced his poetic ability, then I thought I might just pursue the reasons behind his physical deformity.
>
> Any suggestions? What do you think: a dead path or possibility? I realize this is not a question orientated specifically to historical background, but more a background on Pope (Russ is this o.k.)?

Some of the comments on this question included the following:

> Darlene, I already told you in person how I felt about your question.
>
> I think you should do it and I am sure it will be interesting as it will show us the personal side of Pope.

> Darlene: This sounds interesting. It's nice to get another side of things -- a background, or at least some kind of sense of this sort of thing. --Jen

> There are arguments about some of these issues (different biographers have different views). One way to focus it would be to present some

views of it, specifically ascribed to the authors; it's certain a question worth asking.

-- Russ

Darlene,

I didn't pick up on the fact that Pope wasn't a 'very handsome' fella, or as you say "repulsive"! I think you might have to look at Biographies etc to see what his background was like and family life which might have influenced his personality, but, (not to discourage) I think it would be difficult to determine that someone's physical appearance affected their personality.

-Kate

Darlene,

I just read something that described when Pope developed his disease and the pain it caused him. The book relates that as a young man Pope was first stricken with the disease and was convinced he was dying. He even went so far as to write letters of goodbye to his friends. Perhaps the constant expectance of death influenced his nasty attitudes and helped sharpen his satrical tongue.

Tracy

I just read something else about him too: a description of him at fourteen: "He is small and pale, fragile, and already not quite straight in the back . . . , but he has a frighteningly sensitive face, large wondering eyes, and an enchanting voice which will earn him the name of 'the little nightingale'".

I don't know if this is relevant to what you are doing, but I thought it might be nice to hear a pleasant description of the poor guy.

Tracy

Pope was often described in quite attractive terms by his friends, often quite similar to what you found, Tracy. (Who is that, by the way?)

-- Russ

I took the quote from Bonamy Dobree's book Alexander Pope, published in 1952.

Tracy

Darlene:

Colleen can find a connection between his hand-writing and his personal traits, I'm sure there must be lots of info about his physical and personal repugnance.

-Paul

Just a suggestion, but maybe he looked repulsive to the writers who were envious of him. Good question Darlene. I will be curious to see what you find out. -wendy

In response to those questions, Darlene produced an 850 word report on Pope's early life, drawn primarily from George Sherburn's and John Russo's books. Her report included passages like this (just to give you a sense of the tone):

> . . . Since they were Catholics at a time when England's religion was protestant, the Pope's were forced by antipapist legislation to move often, which prompted Mr. Pope to retire from his successful linen business. There is little known of Pope as a child, except that he experienced several traumatic experiences. Although Pope was not physically deformed as a child, his half sister, Mrs. Rackett informed Pope's biographer, Mr. Spence that when he was between the age of three and five "a wild cow that was driven by the place where he was filling a little cart with stones struck at him with her horns, tore off his hat which was tied under the chin, wounded him in the throat, beat him down, and trampled over him" (Russo, p.27). Further Pope studied under four priests, one of which was said to have whipped and ill-used him for writing a satire (isn't that ironic!).

Most of the comments on the report were appreciative; a few raised further questions.

> Darlene,
>
> I enjoyed this report very much; it was an interesting way to look at Pope and his work. However, I think you may have overlooked something of relative importance: what can explain his friends' kind attitudes towards him? Surely, he must have had some attractive qualities. For instance, his voice was quite enchanting--could that have affected his ability to create such rhythmic, lyrical verses? Perhaps not, but I do think his positive attributes should also be explored.
>
> Tracy

> Darlene, I have been fascinated with the physical descriptions of Pope since reading about him. This report is very helpful in giving me a more vivid picture. Have you read Johnson's "From the Lives of Poets", the section on Pope? I read it for this week and I must say, it is a very informative piece. Not only does it talk about his works, but about his personal life too. It said that he"never took tea without a strategem" - his mind was always on the go. It also said he thought quite highly of himself. My question is , "did his brilliantly sharp mind and maybe, his somewhat conceited air have something to do with his physical deformities - was his mind compensating for something else? Something to think about and you should read it if you have not already - its really interesting.
> Trish

> Darlene, this report is very interesting, but I'm afraid I have nothing to add except keep up the good work. kurt

> Darlene, I too liked your report a great deal. It was really interesting to find out more about Pope's physical deformities and how they affected his life and his writing.
>
> Debbie

> Darlene, Isn't the nature of a wild cow to attack, regardless of one's physical appearance! Or should I have interpreted it as a joke?
> - But what a about his friends, I'm sure they didn't reject their sickly friend? Also it's sad that a man who so sparks our enjoyment and

laughter, didn't himself. It is interesting that you seem to suggest without his illness, he wouldn't have produced such satire.
- Kate

This is fascinating stuff. Can you be clearer, when you're quoting from Russo, about who he's citing and where it, in turn, comes from? It might make it easier to keep straight. I like the quote from Johnson a lot, but it seems to me it doesn't really belong where you've got it. I wonder whether you could put it (and some other stuff) into a kind of conclusion, maybe pulled mainly from Johnson? Trish's suggestion seems really a good one.
-- Russ

Darlene, this is a very interesting report-I didn't really think that there would be much correlation between the physical health and appearance of Pope with his poetry. However, your report allows me to think otherwise.
Jean

Some of the comments, like the one about the cow and mine about quoting from Russo, were responded to in the version I now have (the first one is lost in the electrons, unfortunately).

This is only one example of many of the ways in which the written conversation is a conversation both about the subject matter and about the media by which we are exploring it. I hope it is clear why I think there is some important learning going on here; let me conclude with a couple of excerpts from these students' reflections on how their writing has changed during this process.

I have become more conscious of citing where my information comes from. Notice the following from the first of the year:

> "One explanation for the novel's popularity was due to the reaction against the Medieval Romance of the 16th and 17C. People wanted something new, and had a growing distaste of these courtly type of novels which centered upon wishful thinking, escapism, and titillation."

Clearly, this sounds 'text-bookish': I wouldn't have known the characteristics of a Medieval Romance book!

Now I am also much more likely to express more than one point of view on the same subject. The following is from the same report mentioned above:

> "The following are some extracts from "Remarks on Mr. Pope's Rape of the Lock In Several Letters to a Friend", which he wrote in 1728: He called "The Rape of the Lock" a "trifling poem", which was full of "ridiculous incidents" . . .

A final change I noticed in my writing was a greater consciousness about gender:

> "When the reader first looks at the quotations she or he will first notice that the footnotes take up more than the rest of the text!"

Personally, I favor including both genders because to only include one of either sex is discriminatory. I wouldn't have thought this way at the first of the year.

What I mean by being "formal" in content is rigidly sticking to the topic at hand. For example, in English essays I have always dealt with the strict literary aspects--like "Isolation in the Novels of Margaret Laurence" or "The Use of Deception in Macbeth, Othello, and The Fairy Queen", etc. Even my first report for this class was restricted to a literary theme--comedy in eighteenth century. Never before have I dealt with social or political issues in writing an English essay, but for this class I've researched feelings of anti-revolution in eighteenth century England, the treatment of the aged, the conditions of Newgate prison, and the actual profession of writing.

Not only has my taste in topics in this class changed, but the way I write my reports has altered somewhat too. In the last couple of reports I've found myself being much more personal. I was always taught that it was not proper to use personal pronouns in writing essays, but in this class I'm more conscious of who I'm writing for so I find myself putting personal opinions, observations, and questions in my reports. For example, in my Newgate report I asked the question "I wonder what Defoe would think of our twentieth century correctional centers" Not only does that sentence contain a personal question, it is also rhetorical--something else I've been taught never to use.

Also, I feel more of a need to explain why I've chosen to include what I have. In the Pope/Johnson report I have a whole paragraph explaining why I gave short histories of Pope and Johnson. Usually in essays I write that is either not neccessary or not permissible; usually essays have to follow very smoothly and coherently and digressions are not allowed.

Something has just occurred to me about changes in writing for other classes. I'm not sure how much this can be attributed to the influence of this class, but I have found that I write alot more footnotes in other essays now. Perhaps that is my new way of inserting the digressions which are allowed in this class but not in others. I seem to have developed more of a need to explain outside issues. For example, I wrote a seminar paper on Shelley's inspiration in a number of poems. One of the poems was "With Guitar, to Jane". I inserted a footnote identifiying Jane as Jane Williams and gave a little description on her background and relation to Shelley. Before, I would have simply placed in the essay the name of the woman, said she was a friend of Shelley's and would have left it as that. So, I guess this class has influenced my other writing somewhat.

In writing compositions on Norton Textra, I find that I now worry less about my background on certain subjects. In All4Love, I spent a lot of time worrying about my previous knowledge for Antony & Cleopatra - I thought I had really missed an elemental thing. I don't worry about this as much now, and I've come to realize that if I don't know something, I can go look it up. I'm extra good at that now.

I do not offer these as testimonials. They serve me, and I hope they will serve you, as examples of kinds of changes which (assuming they are accurate reflections), occur in this sort of course. They are, I think, very probably due in large measure to the extent to which, in this site, written language is embedded in conversation, linked in dialogic chains, and uttered in contexts where the motives for invention are emphatically and immediately social.

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